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AMERICAN ART EMINENTLY DISTINCTIVE

Is there an American art, an art that is distinctive? Fifteen years ago the French critics, the best in the world, said that America's was the most distinctive of any young art. Many critics have said that it is imitative.

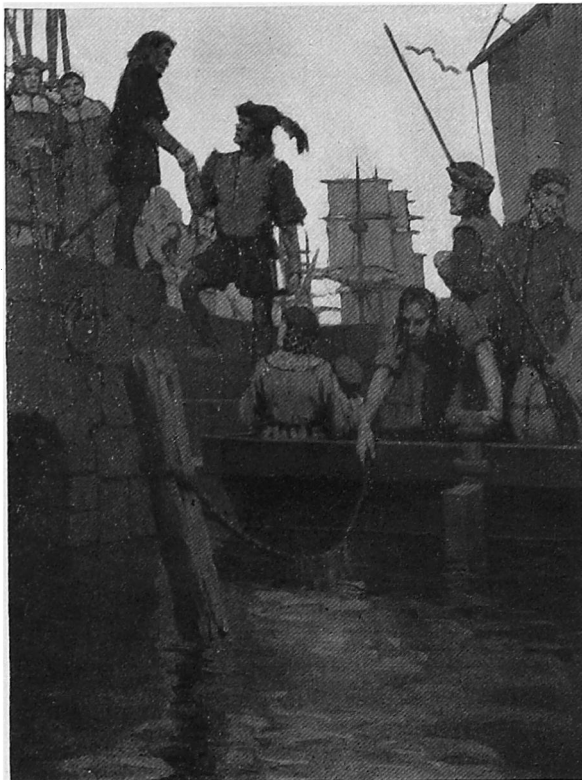


MURAL DECORATION
By JOHN G. COUGHLIN
Art Institute, Chicago

So far from this criticism being well founded, originality and independence are the distinctive characteristics of American art. Cleverness of composition is one of the strong features of American artists' work. The realistic critics demand a realism that borders on sensationalism in art, but American art has gone beyond that, and every great artist of the Nation has been specially gifted with the faculty of composition.

Benjamin West is an illustration. He went to London and became the second president of the Royal Academy, the successor of Sir Joshua Reynolds. He was a great historical painter, while the great painters of England were for the most part portrait painters. He had cleverness of composition. The English painters were bound by the conventionalism that insisted upon the classic in everything. George III. was painted in a Roman toga, and when West painted his great "Death of General Wolfe" he seriously debated whether he should put classic draperies on his figures or be true to history and put the clothing of the period upon his characters. He had the independence and the common sense to be true to history and not guilty of the ridiculous anachronism which his friends advised. His picture became the most popular of the day.

~~THE~~ American art, instead of being imitative, is eminently independent in the brilliancy of its coloring and especially in the remarkable fidelity with which the atmosphere, found nowhere else in the world but in America, is reproduced. Winslow Homer and Alexander Harrison are the greatest sea painters of a generation, but they are diametrically opposed in their



STUDY IN COMPOSITION—OIL

By Sidney H. Rosenberg
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methods and subject. Harrison is a brilliant colorist, he is an apostle of sunshine, and he has solved the secret of brilliant distances. Homer, on the other hand, paints the great poem of the waste of angry waters, and his grim, often melancholy, storms are the greatest sea pictures painted by any artist in the world.

We should understand the reason of Homer's choice if we understood the man and his history. He has lived the hermit life; he is a wanderer, with no family connections. He hates expositions: he despises fame. He is a mystic after Thoreau's own heart, and his genius is often unnecessarily grim. But it is certainly not imitative or undistinctive.

Another superficial criticism is that American artists do not stay at home. They live abroad and there are many artists whom thousands of well informed people do not know to be Americans at all. Sargent was a member of the Royal Academy; it is hard to believe that Shannon is an American. James McNeill Whistler had a short-lived fit of shame at being an American, but he nobly atoned for it in later life. He was a Massachusetts Yankee and tried to be a soldier; he was a cadet at West Point. George Hitchcock and Walter McEwen and many others that might be named won't live in their native land.

I am ashamed to confess that it is because they could not make a living if they did. The American artist finds to his amazement that he can't sell his paintings if he stays here. It is not so much that the artistic environment abroad is more congenial, though that must be admitted to be true to an extent. But it is necessity. He could sell pot-boilers here, but true art is appreciated better abroad than here, and those Americans who do buy canvases prefer foreign imprints and signatures.

George Inness starved in America until he became one of the greatest landscape-painters of the world. He is a conspicuous exception. But wherever the American artist has been, he has not copied. He has been so distinctively distinctive, so daringly original, that the critics can tell an American canvas as soon as they enter a salon. There can be no doubt that the time will come when American artists will live at home. But we must not blame them for our own sins. We have expatriated them. They will come back home when we summon them.

MARY H. FORD.



STUDY IN COMPOSITION—OIL

By H. Dacprick
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✿ Charles Fitzgerald, writing in the *Burlington Magazine*, approaches the debatable question as to a union of artists in New York. Reviewing the ground, he concludes that, "The union will be almost certainly effected sooner of later. The cry of the established and semi-established professionals is for a dignified, united and powerful body, and hardly a relevant protest has been made against it. The remote possibility that the public does not want big exhibitions has never even been suggested; indeed, the public itself does not seem to have a very clear notion of its present needs. We already have the nucleus of a powerful academy."